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ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6884-3504

Exploring daycare teachers' experiences in managing ADHD learners in inclusive classrooms

May Natasha B. Resurreccion: Child Development Teacher, Estancia, Piddig Ilocos Norte, Philippines.

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A B S T R A C T

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of daycare teachers managing learners with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in inclusive classroom settings. Guided by Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method, the study drew insights from in-depth interviews with 15 purposively selected teachers in Ilocos Norte. Five essential themes emerged: navigating behavioral unpredictability, struggling to form emotional connections, relying on improvised strategies, experiencing inconsistent support, and managing moral tensions between care and systemic constraints. Participants described being emotionally vigilant, pedagogically creative, and ethically committed, yet often under-resourced and unsupported. The essence of their experience lies in the tension between their dedication to inclusive ideals and the realities of limited institutional capacity. The findings underscore the importance of professional development that integrates reflective and emotional dimensions, as well as systemic reforms that provide sustained support for inclusive teaching. By centering teachers' voices and experiences, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the human dimension of inclusion in early childhood education.

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Introduction

The inclusion of children with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in early childhood education has become an increasing priority in the global discourse on equitable learning. ADHD, characterized by inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity, often manifests early and presents significant challenges for educators in preschool settings (American

* *Corresponding author. ORCID ID: 0000-0001-6884-3504*
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Psychiatric Association, 2013; Barkley, 2014). While much research emphasizes behavioral outcomes and instructional strategies in formal education contexts (DuPaul et al., 2015), limited attention has been given to how daycare educators themselves *experience* the task of inclusion.

Existing studies often focus on interventions and behavioral outcomes using positivist frameworks (Simonsen & Sugai, 2013; Clark et al., 2021), but these approaches risk marginalizing the voices of educators who must interpret, adapt, and enact inclusive practices under complex conditions. Teachers are not merely implementers of prescribed techniques; they are meaning-makers navigating the emotional, relational, and institutional dimensions of care. As noted by van Manen (1990), educational experiences are not merely events—they are lived structures shaped by the teacher's embodied presence, pedagogical tact, and moral obligation.

In the Philippine context, the drive toward inclusive education has not been equally matched with adequate training, support, and systemic clarity for educators in daycare and preschool centers (Taylor & Green, 2023). Despite policy commitments, daycare teachers often report being underprepared to manage the nuanced needs of children with ADHD, leading to role strain, emotional fatigue, and fragmented support practices (Johnson & Patel, 2021; Martinez, 2022). Moreover, the cultural construction of ADHD and inclusion further complicates teachers' approaches, as beliefs about child behavior are shaped by local norms and expectations.

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of daycare teachers as they engage with ADHD learners in inclusive classrooms. Anchored in phenomenology, this research was concerned with the *essence* of these experiences—how teachers make sense of, respond to, and are transformed by their daily encounters with neurodiversity learners. Specifically, it aimed to surface the meanings teachers attach to behavior management, emotional labor, and professional identity within the context of inclusion. By doing so, the study not only addressed a methodological gap in early childhood and special education literature but also offered insights that may inform culturally responsive, human-centered support systems for educators navigating inclusive pedagogies.

Review of related literature and studies

This section provides the review of related literature and studies about the topics of this research.

Understanding ADHD in early childhood

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental condition marked by persistent inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In the context of early childhood, these symptoms may manifest as excessive movement, difficulty maintaining focus, and emotional dysregulation (Barkley, 2014; DuPaul et al., 2015). These behaviors can interfere with the structured routines of daycare classrooms, particularly those committed to inclusive education.

However, prevailing research tends to locate ADHD within clinical or behavioral paradigms, privileging diagnostic clarity and treatment efficacy (Schmidt et al., 2020; Clark et al., 2021). While valuable, such approaches often render invisible the everyday experiences of educators who must interpret these behaviors in real-time, under constrained conditions. Phenomenological inquiry, by contrast, invites attention to the *meaning* of such behaviors as lived by teachers—the confusion, frustration, care, and improvisation involved in managing ADHD within an inclusive classroom lifeworld.

Challenges of inclusion and teacher experience

Inclusive education mandates have increasingly urged early childhood settings to accommodate neurodiverse learners, yet teachers report feeling ill-equipped to manage the behavioral and emotional needs of children with ADHD (Martinez, 2022; Johnson & Patel, 2021). Studies highlight common challenges such as classroom disruption, peer rejection, and teacher burnout (Polderman et al., 2016; Hoza, 2007), but few explore how teachers *experience* these challenges from within the classroom's emotional and relational ecology.

Teachers' narratives of managing these behaviors—coping with daily disruptions, maintaining emotional regulation, and engaging families—are rarely the focus of empirical literature. Instead, they are often reduced to variables or intervention targets. A phenomenological perspective, informed by van Manen (1990) and Merleau-Ponty (1962), asserts that such experiences are embodied, relational, and morally charged. Educators are not neutral actors but emotionally engaged subjects negotiating pedagogical meaning in complex social worlds.

The lack of training directly affects teachers' ability to manage learners with ADHD by leaving them underprepared for the realities of inclusive classrooms. For example, in many public-school systems—including the Philippine DepEd Basic Education framework—generalist teachers are expected to handle diverse needs, including ADHD, without specialized training. While policies like the Inclusive Education Act (RA 11650) promote access to regular classrooms for learners with disabilities, they often do not mandate intensive, hands-on training for teachers before implementation. This results in situations where teachers face behavioral challenges without the skills or tools to respond effectively.

Without training in evidence-based approaches like positive behavior support (PBS) or differentiated instruction, teachers may rely on generic classroom management techniques—like verbal warnings, isolation, or reward systems—that may not address the root causes of ADHD behaviors. For instance, a teacher unfamiliar with ADHD might interpret a child's constant movement as misbehavior rather than a self-regulation need, leading to punitive measures instead of accommodations such as movement breaks or sensory tools.

Behavior management as lived practice

Research on classroom strategies for ADHD commonly emphasizes structured routines, visual aids, and reinforcement systems (Simonsen & Sugai, 2013; Sutherland et al., 2008). While these interventions are empirically validated, their implementation often overlooks the situated judgment, personal meaning-making, and adaptive skill teachers use daily. The fidelity with which a teacher applies a visual schedule, for instance, is deeply embedded in their prior experiences, beliefs, and relational dynamics with the child.

There is a critical need to understand behavior management not only as a technical task but as a lived ethical practice. Teachers must constantly balance institutional expectations, personal values, and the unpredictable needs of children—often without adequate training or support. As such, the phenomenology of behavior management explores not only *what* teachers do but *how it feels* to engage in such work under conditions of emotional labor and moral tension.

While the literature provides valuable insights into ADHD symptomatology and behavior interventions, it lacks focus on the experiential realities of educators in early childhood inclusive settings. Few studies ask how teachers *make sense* of these behaviors, what meanings they attach to inclusion, or how their identities are shaped by these encounters. This study responds to this gap by centering the voices of preschool teachers and examining the lived structures of their engagement with ADHD learners. In doing so, it aims to enrich the theoretical and practical discourse on inclusion with insights grounded in teacher experience.

Statement of the problem

This study explored the essence of daycare teachers' lived experiences in managing ADHD learners in inclusive classrooms.

Specifically, it aims to address the following research question: How do daycare teachers experience the presence of ADHD learners in inclusive classroom settings?

Scope and delimitation of the study

The study limits its investigation to selected day care center in Ilocos Norte and focused its discussion on the difficulties dealing with ADHD.

Research methodology

This section presents the methodological framework of the study, which includes the research design, locale, participant selection, data collection procedures, analysis approach, and ethical considerations. The methodology was carefully aligned with the study's phenomenological orientation to ensure the faithful representation of participants' lived experiences.

Research design

This study adopted a descriptive phenomenological research design, grounded in the philosophical tradition of Edmund Husserl, to explore the lived experiences of daycare teachers managing learners with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in inclusive classrooms. Phenomenology, as a qualitative approach, seeks to uncover the essence of a phenomenon as subjectively experienced, emphasizing intentionality, embodied meaning, and the suspension of presuppositions (Husserl, 1970; Giorgi, 2009). This design was selected to illuminate not only what teachers do, but how they interpret, feel, and give meaning to their daily encounters with neurodiverse learners.

Locale of the study

The study was conducted in the Municipality of Piddig. All public daycare centers in the locality were considered, providing a contextualized understanding of inclusive teaching practices in a rural Philippine setting.

Population and sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select fifteen (15) daycare teachers who had direct experience managing at least one diagnosed ADHD learner in an inclusive classroom. This criterion ensured that participants could provide rich, first-person accounts of the phenomenon under investigation. The sample size was deemed sufficient to reach saturation while preserving the depth and nuance essential in phenomenological research.

Data gathering instrument

An interview guide was developed by the researcher to elicit deep, reflective narratives from participants. It was validated by three experts in early childhood education and qualitative research to ensure its clarity, cultural relevance, and alignment with the study's objectives. The guide focused on the emotional, relational, and pedagogical aspects of teaching ADHD learners within inclusive settings.

Data gathering procedure

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in either Filipino or English, depending on the participants' preference. Interviews followed van Manen's (1990) lifeworld framework, with probes exploring the emotional labor, ethical tensions, and coping strategies teachers experienced. Each interview was audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Reflexive journaling was maintained by the researcher throughout the process to manage potential biases and preserve phenomenological sensitivity.

Data analysis tool

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method, a rigorous phenomenological analysis framework. The steps involved: (1) reading transcripts to obtain a general sense; (2) extracting significant statements; (3) formulating meanings; (4) clustering meanings into themes; (5) developing exhaustive

descriptions; (6) identifying the fundamental structure of the experience; and (7) validating findings through member-checking with participants. This approach ensured fidelity to the participants' voices and supported the emergence of experiential structures grounded in the data.

Ethical considerations

The study strictly adhered to ethical research principles. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the study's aims, voluntary nature, and the confidentiality of their responses. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reports to ensure anonymity. Additionally, emotional sensitivity was observed throughout the interview process, allowing participants to pause or skip any question that evoked discomfort. Member validation was conducted to affirm the authenticity of the interpretations.

Data presentation and analysis

The lived experiences of daycare teachers managing ADHD learners were examined through Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological method. Following the analysis of the verbatim transcripts, five essential themes emerged that reflect the meaning structures of teaching in inclusive classrooms with ADHD learners. Each theme is presented with selected participant narratives to illuminate the emotional and psychological depth of the experience. Pseudonyms were used for confidentiality.

Theme 1: Always on edge: Navigating unpredictable behavior

Teachers described a constant state of alertness due to the unpredictable behaviors of learners with ADHD—sudden outbursts, running, and disruptions. These incidents weren't rare but shaped the rhythm of each school day. One teacher shared, *"Even a little noise and he'd start running. I never knew what would happen next—I was always on alert."*

This alertness went beyond mental readiness—it was physical. Teachers' bodies were constantly scanning the classroom, anticipating what might go wrong. This intense vigilance became part of their daily routine, forcing them to manage risk and suppress reactions while staying focused on their students.

Over time, this affected how teachers saw themselves. Many felt emotionally drained, doubted their competence, and struggled with the gap between wanting to nurture and needing to maintain control. They weren't just handling behavior—they were dealing with internal stress and emotional conflict.

"Always on Edge" shows that inclusion demands more than strategies. It requires teachers to manage anxiety, show empathy, and maintain control—often without support. This emotional strain challenges the idea that inclusion is only about access. It also raises important questions about the personal cost of teaching in constant uncertainty.

Theme 2: Trying to reach them: Struggles with emotional connection

Teachers often shared the painful feeling of not being able to emotionally connect with learners with ADHD. It wasn't about poor communication, but about a deeper sense of disconnection—of being present but unable to truly reach or be felt by the child. As one teacher said, *"It's like he's in a different world. I feel like I'm not reaching him."*

These moments left teachers feeling helpless and full of self-doubt. Despite being emotionally available, their efforts were often met with silence or detachment. This led many to question their ability to care, leaving them emotionally drained and unsure of their role and impact.

Teachers described the classroom as a space where connection was hoped for but rarely certain. They spoke of the deep desire to be there for their students, even when that presence felt unreciprocated. This emotional imbalance contributed to compassion fatigue and a slow erosion of confidence.

"Trying to Reach Them" shows that inclusion is not just about managing behavior—it's about forming real relationships. For teachers, the most meaningful moments weren't about compliance, but about small signs of recognition and connection. These fleeting moments reminded them of the heart of their work: to be seen, felt, and connected, even when it's hard.

The emotional difficulty of "trying to reach" learners with ADHD often left teachers not only drained, but also uncertain about what to do next. When connection felt out of reach despite their best efforts, many found themselves searching for immediate, practical ways to cope—especially in the absence of clear guidance or support. This emotional strain naturally flowed into a pattern of improvisation, where teachers relied on trial-and-error solutions to manage the unpredictable demands of the classroom. This shift brings us to the third theme: "Band-Aid Strategies – Coping Through Improvisation."

Theme 3: Band-aid strategies: Coping through improvisation

Teachers shared that they often relied on improvised solutions to manage daily challenges with learners with ADHD. While they had some training, many found it lacking or not suited to real classroom situations. As one teacher put it, *"Whatever works that day, that's what I do. There really isn't any training for this."*

These on-the-spot strategies were not about choice but survival. Teachers used whatever worked in the moment because there were no clear systems or supports in place. The term "Band-Aid strategies" reflected their awareness that deeper issues—like lack of training or resources—remained unaddressed.

While teachers were proud of their creativity and adaptability, they also felt exhausted and unsupported. Constant improvising led to burnout, self-doubt, and a sense of being left alone to manage complex needs. They felt the weight of doing their best without the tools they needed.

"Band-Aid Strategies" reveal both the strength and the cost of teaching under pressure. These acts of improvisation are not signing of failure but of quiet resilience. Teachers' ability to care and adapt should be recognized and supported—not just expected without question.

Theme 4: Alone but not alone: The value of collaboration and its absence

Teachers often emphasized the importance of collaboration with parents, specialists, and school leaders in supporting learners with ADHD. However, many shared that this support was inconsistent or missing altogether. They hoped for teamwork, but often faced the challenges of inclusion alone, creating tension between shared responsibility and isolation.

"Sometimes there's a parent who helps, but often, it's just you," one teacher shared. This sense of being alone wasn't just about workload—it was emotional. When collaboration happened, it gave teachers relief and validation. But when it didn't, they felt abandoned, left to handle difficult situations without guidance or backup.

Even in schools that claimed to promote teamwork, many teachers still felt emotionally unsupported. Promises of help often didn't match reality, leaving them to manage everything from behavior issues to communication with families on their own. This gap between stated support and lived experience added to their stress and burnout.

Despite this, teachers remained committed. They anchored their work in care and continued to hope for even small moments of true collaboration. *"Alone But Not Alone"* captures this emotional reality—the need for real, not just symbolic, support—and reminds us that successful inclusion requires a whole team, not just an individual effort.

Theme 5: Between care and constraint: Moral tensions in inclusion

Teachers shared how they often felt torn between their deep care for children with ADHD and the limits set by time, resources, and institutional demands. They didn't question the importance of inclusion, but they struggled with the emotional weight of having to choose between giving focused attention to one child and managing the needs of the whole class.

"I know he needs me, but I have other children too. How can I manage both?" This question reflects not just a scheduling issue, but a painful moral dilemma. Teachers want to be fully present for every child, but the reality of the classroom forces them to constantly balance care with constraint.

They described moments of guilt and sadness—having to turn away from one child in crisis to keep the rest of the class on track. These were not acting of neglect, but survival choices within a system that pushes them to be both caregivers and rule-enforcers without enough support.

"Between Care and Constraint" captures this daily emotional struggle. Inclusion isn't just about placing children in the same room—it's about giving each child meaningful attention. For that to happen, the system must shift to support teachers in ways that honor both their care and their limits.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the complex and emotionally charged landscape in which preschool teachers manage learners with ADHD in inclusive settings. Through a phenomenological lens, these experiences go beyond instructional strategies—they speak to the deep interiority of teaching, the moral tensions educators navigate, and the emotional labor embedded in inclusive care work.

Central to the participants' experiences was a state of *constant vigilance*—a heightened emotional alertness to the unpredictable behaviors of ADHD learners. Teachers described being "on edge," unsure of what each moment might demand. This reflects van Manen's (1990) notion of "pedagogical tact"—the embodied, intuitive judgment teachers exercise in moments of uncertainty. These instances were not merely operational decisions; they were existential acts shaped by care, responsibility, and institutional constraint.

Many teachers conveyed a profound desire for connection, often thwarted by emotional meltdowns or social withdrawal from learners. These moments, described as "trying to reach them," echo Merleau-Ponty's (1962) emphasis on the *intercorporeal nature* of relationships—how understanding emerges not just through language but through bodily attunement and shared presence. When such connection fails, teachers report feelings of inadequacy and isolation, highlighting the emotional vulnerability of inclusive practice.

The strategy of improvisation—described as "doing what works today"—points to the embodied adaptability teachers cultivate. Yet this creative labor often stemmed from necessity rather than empowerment. It underscores the structural neglect many educators face: the absence of sustained training, minimal support from mental health professionals, and inadequate classroom resources. Thus, while teachers exhibit resilience and ingenuity, these coping mechanisms can mask deeper systemic deficits.

Collaboration with parents and specialists emerged as both a source of support and a site of tension. For some, it enabled consistent care across home and school. For others, the lack of engagement from families deepened the feeling of bearing inclusive education alone. This

ambiguity reflects the *intersubjective nature* of inclusion—how its success is contingent upon shared meaning-making and coordinated action across contexts.

Ultimately, the lived experience of inclusive teaching, as revealed in this study, is situated at the intersection of *care* and *constraint*. Teachers are called to enact ethical and responsive pedagogies in classrooms shaped by policy expectations but often devoid of the resources to realize them. Their narratives reflect a commitment to inclusion, but also the personal cost of sustaining that commitment under systemic pressure.

These findings align with and extend prior studies (e.g., DuPaul & Stoner, 2014; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011) by shifting the focus from intervention outcomes to the *meaning and embodiment* of inclusion from the educator's perspective. This phenomenological reorientation foregrounds the emotional, relational, and moral dimensions of working with neurodiverse learners in early childhood.

The implications are clear: inclusive education policy must not only provide strategies but also recognize and support the human experiences of those tasked with implementation. Professional development must integrate emotional self-awareness, reflective practices, and peer support, not just behavioral techniques. Resource allocation must prioritize not only materials but also relational time and collegial dialogue. Only through such holistic support can we honor the lived complexity of teaching in inclusive spaces.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study revealed the lived experiences of daycare teachers as they navigate the complex, emotionally demanding, and ethically charged task of managing ADHD learners in inclusive classrooms. Rather than treating behavior as a problem to be solved, the findings uncover how teachers embody care, patience, and adaptability in contexts marked by unpredictability, emotional strain, and systemic limitation.

The essence of their experience is shaped by a persistent tension—between the desire to support every child and the institutional constraints that limit their capacity to do so. Teachers find themselves improvising daily, balancing empathy with order, and forging emotional connections amidst moments of frustration and isolation. Their stories reflect not just pedagogical effort, but deep emotional and moral labor—making inclusion not only a policy ideal, but a profoundly human endeavor.

These insights underscore the need for inclusive education reforms that go beyond technical solutions. Training programs must cultivate reflective practitioners who are equipped not only with strategies but with emotional resilience and ethical awareness. Systemic investments must

include relational resources: smaller class sizes, specialist collaboration, and time for collegial reflection.

Future research may further explore how the institutional culture of preschools shapes teacher experiences of inclusion, or how these experiences evolve over time. Longitudinal phenomenological studies may offer insight into the enduring meanings teachers attach to their inclusive practice.

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